



Lawmakers unanimously approve autism coverage mandate

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MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) - An Alabama bill requiring some insurers to cover autism treatment for children heads to the governor, after the House of Representatives on Thursday morning accepted Senate changes including an age cap on the coverage.

The unanimous vote in the early morning was a victory for families of children on the autism spectrum who had lobbied lawmakers throughout the session and pressured legislators when the bill appeared to falter. Rep. Jim Patterson, the bill sponsor, said while he disagreed with the age cap on the coverage, he felt the measure was the best they could get this session.

"We got a lot tonight to make things better for a lot of families," said Patterson, R-Meridianville.

The mandate would require insurance plans at businesses with at least 51 employees to cover autism treatment, including applied behavioral analysis therapy, which focuses on improving speech, behavioral and social skills.

Parents of children on the autism spectrum have been fighting for insurance coverage of ABA therapy and say it can be life-changing but at \$100-per-hour it's out of many families' financial reach. Insurance companies and business groups have raised concerns about costs.

The coverage would be capped each year, with the amount dependent on the child's age. Coverage for children 9 and younger would be capped at \$40,000 annually. Coverage for 10- to 13-year-olds would be capped at \$30,000. Older teens would be capped at \$20,000.

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey will sign the bill unless a legal review finds problems, spokesman Eileen Jones wrote in an email.

Government insurance plans, such as Medicaid and All-Kids, would also have to supply the coverage but the requirement wouldn't kick in until late 2018.

The Senate, by a 19-13 vote, added an amendment Wednesday to specify that insurers do not have to provide the coverage to adults.